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AUTHOR Heesacker, Martin
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ABSTRACT

The importance of high levels of involvement in counseling has been related to theories of interpersonal influence. To examine differing effects of counselor credibility as a function of how personally involved counselors are, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of attitude change was applied to counseling pretreatment. Students (N=256) were assessed as either highly ego involved or less ego involved with respect to dating and social skills counseling or career counseling. Subjects were then exposed to a counseling pretreatment intervention promoting participation in either a dating and social skills counseling group or a career planning program. The quality of the intervention and the credibility of the counselor presenting it were varied. Results showed that as ego involvement increased, so did attitudes regarding the personal benefit that subjects would receive from the counseling. As intervention quality increased from weak to strong, so did attitudes regarding personal benefit. Subjects exposed to the low credibility counselor differentiated strong from weak argument interventions better than subjects exposed to the high credibility counselor. As intervention quality increased, so did intent to participate, although overall intention scores suggested that subjects did not intend to sign up. The overall pattern of data is consistent with the ELM, but does not easily explain Strong's (1968) Interpersonal Influence Model, which is currently the theory most often applied to the counseling context. (JAC)

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COUNSELING PRETREATMENT AND THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF ATTITUDE CHANGE

Martin Heesacker
Southern Illinois University

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COUNSELING PRETREATMENT AND THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF ATTITUDE CHANGE

Martin Heesacker
Psychology Department
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901

In this study the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) was applied to counseling. In particular, it was applied to a counseling pretreatment. A counseling pretreatment is an intervention made before actual counseling begins to help potential or future clients participate in and remain in counseling. A typical counseling pretreatment involves discussing with future clients what kind of activities actually go on in counseling, so that their expectations will be clear and more realistic. In this particular case, the pretreatment was a persuasive measure advocating that the subjects sign up for one of two counseling programs.

Since 1968, counseling psychology has used theories of attitude change to help explain counseling phenomena. In 1968, Stanley Strong introduced his interpersonal influence model of counseling. Influenced by Dissonance Theory, Strong reasoned that dissonance occurred in the client when his or her present behavior was challenged in counseling. To the extent that the counselor was perceived as highly credible, the client could not reduce dissonance by discounting the source, so attitude and behavior change were a likely result. Using this reasoning, Strong's model would predict a main effect for counselor credibility, with a highly credible counselor being more persuasive than a low credible counselor. The ELM, on the other hand, would predict different effects of counselor credibility as a function of how personally involved

subjects were. At high levels of involvement (e.g., students hearing about the institution of senior comprehensive exams as a requirement for their graduation) research has shown that source cues are largely ignored. At lower involvement levels (e.g., senior comprehensive exams required at another university) attitudes are commonly based on source cues. At moderate levels of involvement, early evidence suggests that source cues may interact with other features in the persuasion context to produce higher or lower involvement. For example, a person hearing a counter-attitudinal message that is only moderately involving may reduce involvement further when he or she sees that the source is of low credibility. The person might reason that there is no need to do a lot of thinking to defend a position being attacked by such a nonthreatening source. On the other hand, a source of high credibility might induce high involvement, since the recipient might reason that his or her position could be effectively undercut by a highly credible source and might seek to defend that position through greater personal involvement and more cognitive responding.

In any event, only in the low involvement condition would the ELM predict a simple source main effect. However, Strong's model would clearly suggest a main effect for source credibility. My reasoning was that subjects who were experiencing dating or career decision difficulties would be moderately or highly involved with a message about counseling for their problems, and therefore they would not, as Strong's model suggests, respond simply to counselor credibility.

Interestingly, Strong himself has discussed the importance of high levels of involvement in counseling interpersonal influence. However, he

did not have available to him the ELM as a tool for understanding.

As an initial application of the ELM to a counseling context, 256 undergraduates were assessed as highly ego involved or less ego involved, with respect to dating and social skills counseling or career counseling. This assessment was both subjective and objective. Objective assessments were derived from scores on the Social Anxiety and Distress Scale (SAD; Watson & Friend, 1969) and My Vocational Situation (MVS; Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). Subjective assessment scores were derived from responses to Likert items regarding the extent to which subjects felt that dating and career were problem areas for them. Subjects were then exposed to a counseling pretreatment intervention promoting participation in the relevant counseling program (a dating and social skills group or a career planning program). For some subjects, this pretreatment intervention was cogent and compelling, composed of strongly reasoned arguments, while for others the pretreatment was more specious and refutable, composed of poorly reasoned arguments. Crosscutting the involvement and intervention quality variables was a third variable of counselor credibility. Subjects were told that the pretreatment intervention was delivered by a counselor of high credibility (a PhD, counselor of the year) or of low credibility (an undergraduate counseling major, taking the first counseling course).

Subjects' topic-relevant attitudes, cognitions, behavioral intentions, and behaviors were assessed. Subjects' attitudes regarding the personal benefit they would receive from counseling indicated that (1) as ego involvement increased, so did attitudes regarding personal

benefit, (2) as intervention quality increased from weak to strong, so did attitudes regarding personal benefit, (3) subjects exposed to the low credibility counselor differentiated strong from weak argument interventions better than subjects exposed to the high credibility counselor (see figure 1).

A second and less personal attitude item showed only a main effect for intervention quality. As intervention quality increased, favorable cognitions than subjects exposed to the weak arguments intervention. The behavioral intention data indicated that as intervention quality increased, so did intent to participate in counseling.

Finally, the behavioral measure, actual signing up for the relevant group, indicated that no one signed up for counseling. The lack of sign-up was actually consistent with intention scores. This finding supports Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action. Overall, intention scores suggested that subjects did not intend to sign up. Anecdotal evidence suggests that subjects may have thought insufficient time remained in the semester to permit participation.

The overall pattern of data is consistent with the ELM. However, the data are not easily explainable using Strong's (1968) Interpersonal Influence Model, which is currently the theory most often applied to the counseling context.

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Figure 1

Mean standardized personal benefit attitude data of counselor credibility (low or high) by intervention quality (strong or weak arguments), $F(1,253) = 11.02$, $p < .001$.